

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1963

Frost's married women| Empathy or antipathy with nature

Suzanne Smith Gilluly
The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Gilluly, Suzanne Smith, "Frost's married women| Empathy or antipathy with nature" (1963). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2419.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2419>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

FROST'S MARRIED WOMEN: EMPATHY OR ANTIPATHY WITH NATURE

by

SUZANNE SMITH GILLULY

B. A. Good Counsel College, 1958

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1963

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

MAR 14 1963

Date

UMI Number EP35731

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

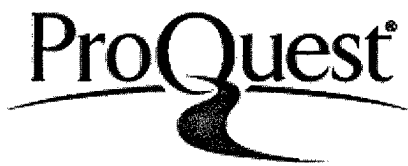


UMI EP35731

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Mrs. Lillian Frost, daughter-in-law of the poet, for her reading of and critical comments on some portions of this paper; to Willard Fraser, son-in-law of the poet, for arranging my meeting with Mrs. Frost; to Malena J. Swain, Department of English, Eastern Montana College of Education, for her careful reading of and comments on the finished paper.

INTRODUCTION

To the casual reader of Robert Frost's poetry, the role he assigns to women might seem a negligible one. The poet himself "never said much about his women characters,"¹ according to his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Lillian Frost. Yet in at least fifteen of his poems women play an important part.

This paper is concerned with the married women in Frost's poetry and with the emotional and psychological climate in which their marriages move. The thesis around which it is built is that the women who are unhappy or who are troubled in their married lives do not exist comfortably in Frost's world of nature while those whose marriages are successful do.

There are several complexities which enter into the survival--or failure--of the marriages of these New England farm couples, just as there are complexities which determine the kind of living the men are able to make tilling the soil. Many of Frost's married women are plagued by fears--fear of loneliness, fear arising from feelings of guilt, fear built up from a lack of communication with their spouses--and doubts. These doubts and fears act as barriers between the husbands and wives until the wife deserts her home and spouse ("The Mill Wife," "The Housekeeper"); the crisis is met ("Home Burial"); the woman approaches insanity ("A Servant to Servants"); or the woman dies ("The Discovery of the Madeiras").

¹Personal interview with Mrs. Lillian Frost. Billings, Montana, November, 1962.

Although Frost does not view rapport with nature as a panacea for the world's ills (the servant to servants is aware that there is more to her cure "than window views / And living by a lake" ["A Servant to Servants" 152-153]),² there is sufficient evidence in his poetry to say that the success of the male-female relationship depends on a harmonious relationship of both the man and woman with nature. This will be substantiated in the course of the paper as the individual poems are analyzed. The woman who is in touch with nature, who can, as can Mary in "The Death of the Hired Man," draw "some . . . tenderness" (112) from nature, is able to communicate with those around her, while the woman who finds terror in her natural surroundings is withdrawn and isolated within herself. (The sinister aspect of nature is imposed on the scene by the viewer; i. e., when the woman in "The Fear" sees danger lurking behind every bush, it is a result of her own guilt.) It is also true that when the husband finds little or no pleasure in nature his attitude often leads to a breakdown in familial communications.

The idea of nature as a barrier-breaker is found in "Mending Wall," a poem which makes no reference to marriage. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," Frost writes, echoing the sentiments of the young husband in "Home Burial" who does not "like such things 'twixt those who love" ("Home Burial" 56). Those who insist on building walls are "mov[ing] in a darkness" ("Mending Wall" 41). In several of the poems dealing with a crucial point in a marriage, the characters move in a figurative and often literal darkness. This point, as well as the recurring theme of "house fear," will be discussed in relation to the poems

² Citations from Frost in my text are to The Complete Poems (New York, 1930), unless otherwise specified.

analyzed in this paper.

In the first chapter, those women whose marriages have failed or are on the brink of failure will be studied. Their failure to communicate with nature will be shown, and the reasons for their guilt or loneliness will be discussed. The second chapter will deal with the women who have made a success of their marriages, and a comparison between their attitudes toward nature and their spouses will be made with the attitudes of the women examined in Chapter I.

In the third chapter, our attention will be directed toward Frost's two witches, the witch of Coos and the witch of Grafton. While technically they are not married women--both are widows--their monologues are concerned with their married lives. In the two witches, we find the culmination of a lifetime of either guilt or happiness in marriage.

The fourth chapter will be devoted to Frost's ideal wife, the picture presented in "The Silken Tent." It will show the areas in which the wives discussed in Chapter I fall short of the ideal, and the extent to which the women examined in Chapter II fulfill it.

The final chapter will present a larger view of the subject showing a connection between the conclusions reached in the first four chapters and the whole of Frost's poetry. We will be shown man's somewhat tenuous relationship with nature, and the effect of this relationship on him.

The paper is concerned only with the poems of Frost; the Masques are not considered. Although there are women characters in both "A Masque of Reason" and "A Masque of Mercy," the poems are essentially Jonah's and Job's. In the works studied in this paper, the action is either centered within the woman herself or in some conflict between husband and wife.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. "It Was Too Lonely for Her There"	1
II. "As You and I Are Married to Each Other"	25
III. "Two Witches"	48
IV. "The Silken Tent"	54
V. "Pan with Us"	58
LIST OF WORKS CITED	64

CHAPTER I

"It Was Too Lonely for Her There"

The New England area described in the poetry of Robert Frost is both a beautiful and a bleak one. We cannot deny that Frost himself finds a certain joy in country living, but the landscape which he pictures in his poetry is often a lonely one of "disused and forgotten roads" ("Ghost House" III.3) and "desolate, deserted trees" ("My November Guest" III.1). The farmers in this area north of Boston must fight against nature as a cruel taskmaster, and too often the joy of country living is lost in the struggle of staking everything on an "uncertain harvest" ("A Prayer in Spring" I.3).

Even when man is able to control nature for a while he has not completely conquered her. Nature works her own way with the handiwork of men, erasing or covering human traces. In the end,

O'er ruined fences the grapevine's shield
The woods come back to the mowing field . . .
("Ghost House" II.1-2)

and Nature takes her own revenge on those who would have made a pattern of her bounty:

. . . stones out under the low-limbed tree
Doubtless bear names the mosses mar. (V. 4-5)

There is a certain sadness in the surroundings expressed not only in human terms but by Nature as well.

The whir of sober birds
Up from the tangle of withered weeds
Is sadder than any words.
("A Late Walk" II.2-4)

"Whatever it is they sing" ("The Hill Wife: Loneliness" II.2) is lost on some of the occupants of the lonely farms set in this countryside, and this in itself is part of the sadness.

The winter days are often overcast and gloomy. The sky seems always pregnant with another storm. "Line storm clouds fly tattered and swift," leaving "the road . . . forlorn all day" ("A Line Storm Song" I. 1-2). Dark trees wear "mask[s] of gloom" ("Into My Own" I.3) as they stand against "the faded earth; the heavy sky" ("My November Guest" III. 3). This is an area of the country where "the wind works against us in the dark" ("Storm Fear" 1), and the fruit of living and working is always an "uncertain harvest" ("A Prayer in Spring" I.3).

Even the hues with which Frost colors his landscapes are cold: blues are predominant, and often the picture is one of a New England winter with its icy whiteness, and the characters become stark figures sketched in sharp black against the backdrop of snow.

The climate in which these New England farm families live is a harsh, cold, and often merciless one; the emotional climate in which some of the farm marriages move is the same. The poems of Frost which are concerned with the emotions and conflicts of childless* couples living on lonely New England farms portray struggles against both a physical and psychological climate of harshness and bleakness. Those who are able to content themselves with nature and an understanding of each other are able to survive, economically and maritally; those who are not, do not.

Although Frost is not a nature poet in the Wordsworthian sense of

*This term is used only in the sense that there is no evidence of children living in the home at the time of the action portrayed in the poem. Lillian Frost pointed out that it is quite common in the New England area for children to leave their farm homes at an early age.

the term, one cannot overlook the fact that his natural settings often suggest more than just a physical setting, and that the relationship his characters have with nature does have significance in the resolution or compromising of conflicts in his poetry. In Wordsworth, nature builds and fashions man's soul, personality and emotions. Nature is endowed with a conscious life; she is an ethical spirit who forms the moral man. In Frost, man imposes his own meaning on nature, and whether he sees nature as something fearful and threatening (as the hill wife does) or as a source of "tenderness" (as Mary in "The Death of the Hired Man" does [112]) makes a difference in his view of human nature as well. When one comes to term with the physical climate in which he lives, he comes to terms with the psychological climate also. Thus, in answer to the same question--"What do you see out the window?"--the wife in "In the Home Stretch" is able to reply that, besides the view, she sees

. . . the years. They come and go
In alternation with the weeds, the field,
The wood . . . (50-52)

while Amy, the young wife in "Home Burial" is not able to see beyond her own grief and grievance. When her grief over the death of her child is allowed to assume proper proportions, when the graveyard, "so small the window frames the whole of it" ("Home Burial" 25), becomes only a part of what she sees from the window, Amy will be able to respond to her husband's love and attempts at understanding.

Not so fortunate is the servant to servants. There will be no gradual emergence from the state of madness into which she is drifting. Her loneliness, resulting from an overload of tasks with which she will "never catch up in this world" ("A Servant to Servants" 172), and a

husband who

. . . undertakes too much,
He's into everything in town, (69-70)

is driving her toward a relapse into hereditary insanity. Perhaps, if she could "drop everything and live out on the ground" (166), she could prevent her approaching madness. But she admits that this is just an idle dream, and that there is more to any cure for her than

. . . just window views
And living by a lake. (152-153)

She knows that she is "past such help" (153). She once took pleasure in nature, but now she has lost touch with it, just as she will soon lose touch with reality.

You take the lake. I look and look at it.
I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water.
I stand and make myself repeat out loud
The advantages it has, so long and narrow,
Like a deep piece of some old running river
Cut short off at both ends. It lies five miles
From the sink window where I wash the plates,
And all our storms come up toward the house,
Drawing the slow waves whiter and whiter and whiter.
It took my mind off doughnuts and soda biscuit
To step outdoors and take the water dabble
A sunny morning, or take the rising wind
About my face and through my wrapper,
When a storm threatened from the Dragon's Den,
And a cold chill shivered across the lake.
I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water . . . (16-31)

This passage not only shows that the woman has lost touch with nature (once it took her mind off her chores, but this was in the past; and all she can do now is stand looking at the lake, repeating a worn-out and meaningless litany of its advantages), but it describes her life as well. Here has been a "narrow" life, "cut short off at both ends." As a child she lived in a house haunted by the memory of her insane uncle. Her own insanity is inherited from the "old running river" of her family.

In a childish ironic drama, she played in the cage "like a beast's stall" (118), which her uncle had once occupied. Now her life is being cut short at this end; she is slipping into madness and at the same time accepting it without appealing to her husband for help or understanding. There is a certain dignity about her; she continues with her daily tasks even though they just need doing over again, and she is aware that before much longer she will again be sent to the Asylum.

I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going;
Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I? (154-155)

Ironically, in speaking to the caspers along the lake shore, she tells them that she would probably be afraid to sleep out on the ground; "I haven't the courage for a risk like that" (166), she says. And yet she uncomplainingly faces the fate that she knows lies ahead, and the lonely life she is presently leading, virtually ignored by her husband, waiting on him and his "great good-for-nothings" (75) hanger-ons who "take advantage of him shamefully" (73), with the philosophy that "behind's behind" (170).

There is a hint that Len, her husband, has indicated by some word or sign in the past that she was a hindrance to him when she had "her fancies." She was sent off to the State Asylum, although at the time she went she "wouldn't have sent anyone of 'hers' there" (89). Now she feels that

. . . the place is the asylum.
There they have every means proper to do with,
And you aren't darkening other people's lives--
Worst than no good them, and they no good
To you in your condition; you can't know
Affection or the want of it in that state. (95-100)

She fails to see, however, that it is "the want of affection," or at least lack of consideration, on her husband's part that is driving her

toward "that state."

She recognizes (as many of the farm wives portrayed in Frost's poems do not) that "there's small profit" (67) in comparing the work that men and women do. Len "works when he works as hard as [she does]" (66). He has failed, however, to listen to the doctor who said the woman's only cure would be found in rest.

It's rest I want . . .
 From cooking meals for hungry hired men
 And washing dishes after them--from doing
 Things over and over that just won't stay done.
 By good rights I ought not to have so much
 Put on me, but there seems no other way. (49-54)

Len says that the "best way out is always through" (56), and he has pushed his wife to the point where she agrees that

I can see no way out but through--
 Leastways for me--and then they'll be convinced. (58-59)

By the time they are "convinced," it will be too late for the servant to servants. Already she says she "can't express [her] feelings any more" (7).

It's got so I don't even know for sure
 Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything.
 There's nothing but a voice-like left inside
 That seems to tell me how I ought to feel,
 And would feel if I wasn't all gone wrong. (11-15)

On the surface it would seem that Len had done everything in his power for his wife. It was his idea to move away from the farm where the ghost of her uncle still lived in his cage in the attic. She was glad to get away.

. . . I waited till Len said the word.
 I didn't want the blame if things went wrong.
 I was glad though, no end, when we moved out,
 And I looked to be happy, and I was,
 As I said, for a while--but I don't know!
 Somehow the change wore out like a prescription. (146-151)

The change meant "sacrifice" (63), and Len "went at it to make up the loss" (64). But he is a man with a great deal of energy and drive, who "looks on the bright side of everything" (45). For him the change meant a new challenge, work to be done "from sun to sun" (65). For his wife it meant a neverending stream of chores, tasks to be done and done again. Because there is "more to it than just window views" (152), and because she "won't ask him" (153) for a respite from her work, she is slipping away into insanity, a lonely woman who wistfully tells her listener, "I'd rather you'd not go unless you must" (173).

In the servant to servants we see a woman who has lost touch with her natural surroundings, who can only "look and look" (16) at the lake near her home. It has no meaning for her and affords her no pleasure, although once it did. Just as there is no communication for her with nature, there is none with her husband who is too busy with his civic projects to pay attention to his wife. She has reached the point where she "can't express [her] feelings" (7). Her early life was shadowed by the memory of her insane uncle, just as her life is darkened now by her approaching insanity. In this poem we find a woman "mov[ing] in darkness" ("Mending Wall" 41), and voicing her fear of it when she tells the campers on her property that she might find a respite from her work by living on the ground as they do, but "some night, [she] shouldn't like it" ("A Servant to Servants" 57).

The hill wife's husband, like Len, is too busy with other things to pay much attention to his wife. All of his time is spent working their farm. After a day in the fields, he is tired and undemonstrative when he returns to the farmhouse. And so the hill wife slips, not into insanity, but away.

It was too lonely for her there,
 And too wild,
 And since there were but two of them,
 And no child,

And work was little in the house,
 She was free,
 And followed where he furrowed field,
 Or felled tree.

She rested on a log and tossed
 The fresh chips,
 With a song only to herself
 On her lips. ("Hill Wife: The Impulse" I-III)

The hill wife often sits in the field, toying with the objects of nature,
 but unlike Mary in "The Death of the Hired Man" who

. . . puts out her hand
 Among the harp-like morning glory strings,
 Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
 As if she played some unheard tenderness . . . (9-12)

she has a

. . . song only to herself
 on her lips. ("Hill Wife: The Impulse" III.3-4)

The hill wife relies in part on nature to fill the void in her life. But
 she pays no attention to nature in reality, and listens for the birds
 around her home only for the noise they make, not even being aware of
 "whatever it is they sing" ("Hill Wife: Loneliness" II.2). Both the
 husband and wife are

. . . too sad
 With birds that fill their breasts
 But with each other and themselves
 And their built or driven nests. (III)

And perhaps the reason the bird's song is incomprehensible to them, that
 they are saddened by it, that they care about it as much as they do, is
 that they have not filled their breasts

But with each other and themselves
 And their built and driven nests. (III)

The wife, particularly, feels that there is something missing in her life. Everything which surrounds her on the farm takes on a sinister meaning. A tramp who stops for a handout is magnified in her imagination into a villain who is "watching [them] from the woods as like as not" ("The Hill Wife: The Smile" 12). When the young couple return to their home after an evening away from it,

They learned to rattle the lock and key
To give whatever might chance to be
Warning and time to be off in flight;
And preferring the out- to the in-door night,
They learned to leave the house-door wide
Until they had lit the lamp inside.

("The Hill Wife: House Fear" 5-10)

This superstitious feeling that an unnamed something inhabits the house while the owners are away and waits for them to return in the darkened rooms is found in other Frost poems, notably "The Fear." In "The Hill Wife," however, we find that this "house fear" does not subside for the young wife once the couple is inside. While her husband sleeps, the wife is tortured with dreams of what the tree outside their bedroom window might do.

She had no saying dark enough
For the dark pine that kept
Forever trying the window-latch
Of the room where they slept.

The tireless but ineffectual hands
That with every futile pass
Made the great tree seem as a little bird
Before the mystery of glass!

It never had been inside the room,
And only one of the two
Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream
Of what the tree might do.

("The Hill Wife: The Oft-Repeated Dream")

Finally, unable to continue her lonely life, where the birds' song is incomprehensible to her, where the dark pine threatens her in the

night, she leaves, hiding herself "in the fern" ("The Hill Wife: The Impulse" V.4) when her husband comes to seek her. So nature, which has not been a friend to her before, aids her in her final betrayal of her "built and driven nest" ("The Hill Wife: Loneliness" III.4) and the husband who shares it with her.

The theme of loneliness in love, or lack of communication between two who love, is found in several of Frost's poems. In "Home Burial," perhaps the best example of a couple unable to communicate with one another in Frost's poetry, there is also a conflict of right versus right. The couple has lost its first child; the young son has been buried in the family plot on the farm. Amy, the wife, can see the graveyard from a window in the house, and the graveyard is, literally, all that she sees from the window. Her husband has grieved over the death of his child, but he has reconciled himself to his loss. In his man's way, he is unable to comprehend the grief which his wife carries with her and natures.

I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
 What was it brought you up to think it the thing
 To take your mother-loss of a first child
 So inconsolably--in the face of love.
 You'd think his memory might be satisfied--(65-69)

But Amy is unable to turn to her husband for consolation or respond to his love. She "vainly wrestles with the blind belief / That ought we cherish / Can ever quite pass out of utter grief / And wholly perish."¹ Her grief is overwhelming, fed not only on sorrow over her child's death, but on the seeming callousness of her husband who dug the child's grave

¹Robert Frost, In the Clearing (New York, 1962), p. 99.

with his own hands and could, later in the kitchen

. . . sit there with the stains on [his] shoes
Of the fresh earth from [his] own baby's grave
And talk about [his] everyday concerns. (88-90)

Amy feels that grief should be a continuous action, that the person who truly grieves cannot be concerned about daily living and its problems the way her husband is, or the way the people in "Out, Out--" react to the death of the youth who has cut himself on a saw:

. . . And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs. (33-34)

Amy's philosophy is that

The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't! (101-111)

And, actually, both Amy and her husband are right. It does seem that sorrow is often overshadowed by the concerns of living, but certainly the grief that shuts out all human comfort and breaks down communication between those who should be comforting each other is not the answer. Because Amy feels that her husband does not understand or share her grief, she has been carrying it to others. Several times in the course of the poem, the husband pleads, "Amy! Don't go to someone else this time" (41). He sees, as the servant to servants did but Amy does not, the difference between men and women which makes them react differently to the same circumstance, and which sometimes make complete understanding impossible.

A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk. (52-53)

The solution to the present difficulty might be a pact between the two to avoid certain subjects, but the husband is not in favor of

. . . such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them. (56-58)

He recognizes that loneliness in love, a closing of communication between those who love, will lead eventually to the death of love. Perhaps, as he says, since she has "said it all" (112),

[She] won't go now . . .
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up. (113-114)

At the beginning of the poem, Amy is standing at the top of the staircase, looking out the window. When she moves aside to let her husband pass, their places are reversed, with the husband at the top of the stairs, and Amy at the foot, toying with the door-latch just as she toys with the idea of leaving the house and taking her grief to "someone else" (41). Amy "cower[s]" under him" (11), "refus[ing] him any help" (13) which might make the discussion easier for both of them. Her excessive grief in the face of what she supposes is indifference on his part has alienated her. As he literally mounts the stairs, he symbolically gains power over her, forcing her to talk out her grief, to express herself on the subject she has been silent on since the burial of the child. If it is necessary, he will "follow and bring [her] back by force" (120). He cannot understand her grief; her prolonging of sorrow seems unnatural to him, and excessive. It has built a wall between "those that love" (56) and Amy, whose grief has erected it, is, as Frost points out in "Mending Wall," "mov[ing] in a darkness" (41).

It is in "Home Burial" that we find perhaps the best portrayal of

characters stumbling about in the darkness of their own emotions expressed by the setting of the poem. Amy and her husband confront each other inside the house; they are shut off from the sunlight of the outside world. Amy stands by the door, thinking of going out, but she is hesitant to give up the shadows for the brightness outdoors, just as she clings to her grief rather than allowing her husband to comfort her. When she does look outside, she finds no joy in nature, but sees only that one plot of earth where her child is buried. The emotions that keep her cloistered in the shadows of her home keep her "mov[ing] in darkness" ("Mending Wall" 41) with her husband and nature as well.

The woman in "The Fear" is "mov[ing] in darkness" ("Mending Wall" 41) both literally and figuratively. She has left her husband to become a common-law wife to Joel with whom she lives on a lonely farm. Her guilt and fear have built up inside her to the point that she fancies casual strollers are either her deserted husband or people he has "sent to watch" (48). The house which she and Joel inhabit is a place of shadows and unnamed dangers:

Doors locked and curtains drawn will make no difference.
 I always have felt strange when we came home
 To the dark house after so long an absence,
 And the key rattled loudly into place
 Seemed to warn someone to be getting out
 At one door as we entered at another.
 What if I'm right, and someone all the time--(19-25)

Joel, showing common sense, feels the face the woman has seen in the bushes is that of "someone passing" (27). The woman's insistence that she has to look prompts him to think that "there's more in it than [she'd] inclined to say" (34). When he questions her, asking if the face she saw was that of her husband, she answers that it could have

been anyone, and that unless she investigates

. . . he'll be everywhere
 Around us, looking out of trees and bushes
 Till I shan't dare to set a foot outdoors. (51-53)

Evidently the relationship between the woman and Joel is not as satisfactory as it might have been. When she insists on discovering who the stroller is, Joel, knowing that she thinks it might be her husband, scoffs

But it's nonsense to think he'd care enough. (55)

And the woman answers

You mean you couldn't understand his caring. (56)

There is a hint that the woman feels that perhaps she has made the wrong choice in leaving her husband, and this fear, compounded with the feelings of guilt she harbors, has brought her to the point where she sees vengeance lurking behind every tree.

Carrying a lantern to enable her to see through the darkness, the woman crosses the grass and calls out "to all the dark" (67) to see if anyone is there. When an answer comes through the darkness it startles her. The face she had seen by the side of the road was that of a man who has his child

Out walking. Every child should have the memory
 Of at least one long-after-bedtime walk. (90-91)

The dark night holds no fears for the innocent child who is unassailed by guilt. The woman, realizing how foolish her fears have been, speaks again to Joel.

You won't think anything. You understand?
 You understand that we have to be careful.
 This is a very, very lonely place. (98-100)

And for the woman it undoubtedly is a "very, very lonely place." Just as

Amy in "Home Burial" found herself unable to communicate her feelings to her husband because she does not think that he will understand, the woman in "The Fear" cannot express to Joel her guilt or fear that she has chosen wrongly and she finds herself alienated from him.

At the end of the poem

The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,
It touched, it struck, it clattered, and went out. (102-103)

leaving her in a symbolic darkness, surrounded by an alien nature in which hide figments of her imagination, choked with her own guilt, and unable to communicate her emotions to Joel.

Common law marriage is not an unusual subject in Frost's poetry. In "The Housekeeper" he presents a picture of a deserted "husband."

"What are they trying to do to me, these two?" John Hall
asks a friend. (229)

His common-law wife, Estelle, has run away from the farm on which she has lived for the past fifteen years, away from the man to whom she has been both wife and mother. John Hall is left with only his "mother-in-law," and as soon as Estelle is settled and can send for her mother, even this prop of his existence will be removed.

This is one of the few Frost poems which deals with the characters after the main crisis has been met and resolved. At the opening of the poem, Estelle has already been gone for two weeks; John Hall has been aware of his desertion for that length of time, but he has not yet accepted it--if, indeed, he ever will. The reader of the poem must ask with the neighbor to whom Estelle's mother narrates her story,

Can't you and I get to the root of it?
What's the real trouble? What will satisfy her? (178-179)

The answer to this question seems to be that Estelle has left Hall

not because she is ashamed of her life with him, or because she has been mistreated, but simply because she resents the manner in which he has forced her to compromise her dignity as a human being by refusing to marry her.

Hall is best characterized by his "mother-in-law" when she calls him a "dreadful fool" (232). He has had the companionship of the old woman and Estelle, who came to his farm some fifteen years before to be a housekeeper and who drifted into a common law relationship with him. Despite her pleadings that he marry her, Hall has let the relationship continue as it began, saying

Better than married ought to be as good
As married-- (89-90)

But for Estelle, "better than married" was not good enough, and the smoldering resentment within her finally erupts; she runs off to marry another man, leaving Hall to "sort of swear the time away" (56).

The mother-in-law tells the story of what has happened to a neighbor who has stopped by the house to see John, and to find out what truth there is to the rumors he has heard. She is a gossip creature with no compunctions about telling the story of her daughter's unconventional marital arrangements to the man. At first, she admits, the relationship between Estelle and John bothered her, but she has grown used to it and her position in the household.

"I've been built in like a big church organ" (41), she tells her listener; and, like a church organ, she wheezes out her story with all of the stops pulled.

It is made quite clear that Estelle and her mother have been responsible for bringing what money there was into the house. Estelle did not

only the inside chores, but a great deal of the outside work as well. Hall, the old woman says, would "say she does it more because she likes it" (118), and it could be true that Estelle chose to spend more and more of her time outside, away from the confines of the house and relationship she had grown to abhor. Her mother beads slippers for young ladies of the area to wear to dances. The prize possessions of the farm have been bought with beads--"wampum" (166) the old lady calls it. John Hall has not been a successful farmer; when Estelle sends for her mother, when he will be dependent on himself, he will "let things smash" (55).

When the neighbor points out that "Two of you out will leave an empty house" (46), the old woman tells him,

'I don't just see him living many years
Left here with nothing but the furniture.
I hate to think of the old place when we've gone,
With the brook going by below in the yard,
And no one here but hens blowing about.
If he could sell the place, but then, he can't:
No one will ever live on it again.
It's too run down. This is the last of it.' (47-54)

Little is said directly about Estelle, but knowing the kind of man John Hall is gives the reader a picture of the woman who has left him. She had allowed herself to drift into a compromising situation, but she retained her dignity to the extent that it caused her to break her commitment to Hall and find a man who would marry her. She is stubborn--as stubborn as Hall himself, but has more drive. She takes the initiative to run off, while Hall is content with the status quo and sees no reason for giving in to her on the question of marriage. Estelle is--as is John --"fond of nice things" (125). They both spent a great deal of time and effort preparing their poultry for fairs, for example, and much of the hard-earned money--brought in by a kind of gaiety that is absent from

the Hall household--has been spent on fine birds. We can assume, too, that Estelle has had to be both wife and mother to Hall, who is "like a child" (59).

Childishly, Hall has temper tantrums, such as the one the old woman describes to the neighbor:

He hoed a little yesterday for me:
I thought the growing things would do him good.
Something went wrong. I saw him throw the hoe
Sky-high with both hands. I can see it now--
Come here--I'll show you--in that apple tree.
That's no way for a man to do at his age:
He's fifty-five, you know, if he's a day. (62-68)

Hall finds no pleasure now in "growing things;" as the old woman pointed out, "This is the last of it" (54). His own life has stopped growing; he has reached the end of it with Estelle's leaving.

The hoe hanging in the apple tree--like a flag flying in defiance--the fact that Hall does not even bother any longer to unhitch his horse from the wagon but

just drop[s] the reins
And turn[s] Doll out to pasture, rig and all (218-219)

shows that the old woman's prediction that he will "let things smash" (55) is a true one. When John voices his own feelings--"Isn't it Hell" (225)-- the reader can feel that it truly is hell for him, but that he has brought it on himself by his own stubbornness and childishness. His attitude is neatly summed up by the woman when she says that John has

. . . made up his mind not to stand
What he has got to stand. (74-75)

He has ruled--and ruined--his home by his childishness. With both women gone, he will be lost, just as a child would be if he were left to fend for himself.

The situation, though it has been a strain, has been a comfortable

one for the older woman. It would have been to her interest to keep Estelle and John together. "This is a good home: I don't ask for better" (98). But it has been made a good home mainly through her efforts and those of her daughter. There has not been much in the way of material comforts: the farm is heavily mortgaged, and the women have had the responsibility of filling the purse. "Our pretty things are all outdoors" (119), the old woman says; and this may be another indication that Estelle preferred to put her time, money and energy to work somewhere outside the house that was never really hers to adorn.

John has always been kind to the women ("He knows he's kinder than the run of men" [88]), but this kindness is not enough to make up for the unintentional, but nevertheless very real, affront to Estelle that his not marrying her amounts to. The women in his household have been cut off from normal companionship with the women of the area because of Estelle's marital situation. Estelle "stood the strain" (185) for as long as she could; as for the old woman, she "got wonted to it" (189).

Weighing everything in the balance, the two women did not

. complain.

But you see, don't you, we take care of him.

And like it, too. It makes it all the worse. (166-168)

If John had been mistreating Estelle, if he had been anything but kind to her (except on the question of marriage), her departure would have been understandable to John and the neighbor, but they fail to comprehend that wounded dignity is harder to bear than physical hardship, and that Estelle had no recourse but to leave since John would not marry her.

The real reason for Estelle's leaving, says her mother, is that she just turned against John. She cannot come back to him now--even if he would agree to marriage--because she has married someone else. The

neighbor receives this announcement with the observation that "She's bad, that's all" (200). Not bad to get married when she had the chance, but bad because she has left things in such a state on the farm. "See what she's done!" (202) the neighbor exclaims. She has left John, a childish man, to shift for himself; she has, in other words, condemned him to losing everything. John is, the old woman says,

. . . helpless
 In ways that I can hardly tell you of.

 If he's untidy now, what will he be--? (169-175)

When John returns to the house, he does not enter the kitchen but calls his friend outside to talk. He considers the whole affair a plot against him by both mother and daughter. "What are they trying to do to me, these two?" (229) he asks. But to the "mother-in-law" his question is simply "shouting" (230) and she urges the neighbor to go along with him and "make him stop" (230) it. John is reacting in his usual childish way to the dilemma facing him. His reaction to the news he has heard in town--word that Estelle has married and there is no chance of her returning to him--is akin to his throwing the hoe at the apple tree--a defiance of things as they are, not standing what he has got to stand.

In "The Housekeeper," it is John Hall who is out of touch with nature. His childish temperament does not allow him to find comfort in "growing things" (63). He takes his rage out against nature, flinging his hoe at the apple tree (a fruitful plant, which his "marriage" has not been). The same childish stubbornness which does not allow him to understand nature makes it impossible for him to understand human nature as well.

John Hall's failure to understand Estelle resulted in his desertion.

It is a failure to understand--either themselves or each other--which leads to tragedy for the runaway lovers of "The Discovery of the Madai-ras" as well.

The woman who is brought on board a ship is "a stolen lady" (1). She is not brought against her will, but as the willing conquest of her lover. When the stormy weather which plagues the trip--as it will plague this ill-fated affair--subsides, the woman is brought on deck where she sat all day and

. . . she and her lover would sit opposed
And darkly drink each other's eyes
With faint head shakings no more wise.
The most he asked her eyes to grant
Was that in what she does not want
A woman wants to be overruled.
Or was the instinct in him fooled?
He knew not, neither of them knew.
They could only say like any two,
"You tell me and I'll tell you." (38-47)

Because neither one of the two had a clear concept of his own or the other's motives, the voyage, begun in search of some idyllic love, must end in disaster.

When the captain of the ship tells the man a tale about a pair of ill-fated lovers who crossed on his ship once in the past, the man, in a moment of cruelty, relates it to the woman. She is overcome, not so much by the tale itself, but by her own feelings of guilt which have practically paralyzed her. The lovers are put off the ship on a small unnamed island, and when the woman dies, her lover stays long enough

. . . to carve on stone
The name of the lady with his own
To be her only marriage lines. (121-123)

Ironically, when the tablet of stone is discovered, and the island is named, "[it] was named for him instead of her" (135). The poem is a

cruel jest on love; both pair of lovers come to disastrous ends: the "captive pair" (54) (who are true in their love to the end) are bound together and cast overboard,

And went embraced to the cold and dark
To be their own marriage feast for the shark, (84-85)

while the woman who is leaving "English law behind" (16) (and, presumably, a husband), finds herself questioning, as the woman in "The Fear" did, whether or not she has made the right decision. Because she is obsessed by the idea of sin, and feels that she is unworthy of true love, and because neither of the pair really understands what it is they are doing, the expedition to find a paradise of love is doomed from the outset.

The woman in "The Discovery of the Madeiras" is moving in the same darkness that envelops several of the women mentioned in this chapter. She is brought aboard the ship by her lover from a "darkening windy village slip" (7). Much of the trip is stormy--the sky is dark and burdened with thunder clouds, and even when the storm subsides and the woman is brought on deck, she seeks the answers to her doubts and questions in her lover's eyes which are as cloudy as the sky once was. When she is removed from the ship, she is put down on a tropical island, but she is unaware of her natural surroundings, and, deep in a coma of guilt and fear, she dies. Although physically she reaches the "vague Paphian bourn" (17) for which she set sail, she never realizes it.

The poem that best illustrates Frost's theme of loneliness in love is also perhaps his cruellest poem, "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," a parody of the Seven Joys of the Virgin. At the end of the poem, the woman is completely shut off, isolated, from her children and her would-be lover. She is surrounded by everything that would seemingly

contribute to her happiness, but she is forced to check by pride her natural impulses and hold everything she longs to communicate within herself.

In this one poem, Frost combines the problems that face the individual women in "A Servant to Servants," "The Hill Wife," "The Fear," "Home Burial," and "The Discovery of the Madieras." Ironically, the woman is "cast down the seven levels of the world" (3), and her seven "joys" (21) are a combination of the lucky numbers three and four. Three of her "joys" (21) are personal--her wedding, her children, and the comfort she derives from knowing that her failure has been because of the strangeness of the life she chose to her way. Four of her "joys" (21) are concerned with the communication of her circumstances, her innermost feelings, to her friends and potential lover. Although she grieves after her wedding, she keeps her grief a secret from those who knew her well; later, when they do discover her circumstances, they are so far removed from her that they do not care enough "to think much or care" (30) although she was once "the pride of friends" (18). She never deigns to tell the people who surround her in her lowered circumstances about what she once was, and finally, when one comes

. . . with eyes to see
And wonder at her where she is,
And words to wonder in her hearing how she came there,

But without time to linger for her story (,)
Be her last joy her heart's going out to this one
So that she almost speaks. (46-51)

She has made free choices throughout her life, but "the voices" (2) have "taken up the task beyond her choosing" (11), and the woman finds herself cut off from every source of comfort, unable to communicate (as the women in the above mentioned poems find themselves unable to

communicate), and "hopeless of being loved" (41-42)

This is the fate to which all of the women in this chapter find themselves condemned--either through feelings of guilt, fear, or a combination of the two; or through the attitudes, either real or supposed, of their husbands.

It is obvious that the women in these poems do not exist in a world of natural objects or emotions. To all of them, nature is alien or, in some cases, a tormentor. Their judgment and capacity to love have been warped by guilt, fear, or insanity, resulting from a loneliness in love which has grown out of an inability to communicate with or respond to the loved one. In some cases, the reason for this lack of communication can be traced to the attitude of the husband--Len, in "A Servant to Servants" who is too busy with his man's work and community activities; the husband in "The Hill Wife" who has too much work to do; John Hall, whose stubbornness and childishness result in the flight of Estelle, his common-law wife--while in other cases the emotions of the woman involved are the factors--the guilt and fear of the woman in "The Fear"; the same emotions in the runaway "stolen lady" (1) of "The Discovery of the Madeiras"; and the inability of Amy in "Home Burial" to recognize in her husband's seeming cessation of grief the feelings of a simple, more natural person than she in her excessive sorrow is.

CHAPTER II

"As You and I Are Married to Each Other"

Chapter I was concerned with the poetry of Frost which portrayed women unhappy in their marriages or liaisons because of their inability to overcome guilt, fear, or their inability to communicate with or respond to their husbands. This chapter will deal with women who, although their external circumstances are the same; i. e., they live in the same New England area, their husbands are engaged in the same type of work, they are childless, nevertheless have managed to come to terms with their surroundings and are able to communicate with their husbands and find pleasure in their situations and natural environment.

In "The Death of the Hired Man," the reader finds the antithesis of the wretchedly unhappy women discussed in Chapter I. Mary, the farm wife, is attuned to both the natural surroundings in which she lives and the nature of her husband, Warren. She exists in the world of natural objects around her to the extent that when the moon poured "its light . . . softly in her lap" (108), she

. . . spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness . . . (108-112)

Although the main character in "The Death of the Hired Man" is Silas, the farm laborer who has returned to the only home he has ever known to die, he is presented to the reader only through the conversation of Mary and Warren. Through the use of this device, Frost not only reveals the character of Silas, but demonstrates the mutual affection and

understanding of the couple and their ability to communicate with one another.

While Silas is revealed as a simple man, the "black sheep" of his family, who

. . . . Worthless though he is,
 . . . won't be made ashamed to please his brother (151-152)

a wealthy banker who lives but a few miles from the farm where he has stopped, Mary and Warren reveal themselves through their conversation. At the beginning of the poem, Warren, who has not seen Silas since his return to the farm, is adamant about not allowing him to stay. He is the practical member of the family; Silas is too old to be of much help around the farm, and "what help he is there's no depending on" (17). Warren is used to the old hired man's way of leaving the farm at the busiest season because some neighboring farmer has offered him some "little pay" (19) which Warren cannot afford to give him. "In winter he comes back to us. I'm done" (30), he says.

Debate-like, the conversation switches between the husband and wife with each stating his own view of the case. Mary's heart has obviously been touched by the "miserable sight, and frightening, too" (236) which Silas had presented when she first found him, "huddled against the barn-door fast asleep" (35). Although Warren is quite positive about his stand at the beginning of the poem, Mary's quiet persuasiveness is able to bring him around to her point of view. When she mentions Silas' desire to teach Harold Wilson, a college boy who once helped Silas and Warren with the haying, "how to build a load of hay" (90), Warren admits that this is the old man's one accomplishment.

Frost makes use of the convention of dramatic irony as he brings

the poem to the point where Warren capitulates and begins to defend Silas. Mary says,

Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different, (102-105)

while Silas lies dead inside the house.

"Warren," she said, 'he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.'

When Warren mocks at her use of the word "home" it is a gentle mockery.

He thinks of home as

. . . the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in. (122-123)

To Mary, however, home is "something you somehow haven't to deserve" (125).

At this point in the poem,

Warren lean[s] out and [takes] a step or two,
Pick[s] up a little stick, and [brings] it back
And breaks it in his hand and toss'es it by. (126-128)

Just so has his argument been broken, and from this point on he champions Silas. When Mary points out that Silas is "just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide" (148), Warren answers that he "can't think Si ever hurt anyone" (153).

Mary replies that

. . . he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
.
You'll be surprised at him--how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it. (154-160)

Again the dramatic irony is at work; it is present, too, in Warren's reply: "I'd not be in a hurry to say that" (161).

While Warren goes into the house to see the old hired man, Mary

waits for him on the porch, waiting to see

. . . if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon. (167-168)

At this point, the poet clearly shows Mary as she exists in the natural world around her. The small cloud hits the moon, and

Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she. (170-171)

This actually is the climax of the poem; the news of Silas' death with which Warren returns is anticlimactic: the reader has been aware of it since reading the title of the poem. Mary's "small sailing cloud" (167) of persuasion has brought Warren around to her point of view; she experiences a communion with nature, playing on the morning-glory strings

. . . . some tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night, (112-113)

which also enables her to understand human nature: that of Silas and of Warren.

Frost's use of the moon as a symbol of nature's favor is apparent in this poem, as it is in "In the Home Stretch," where the couple involved look upon the new moon as a friend "to see [them] through [their] first two weeks" (81) in the country. To the women discussed in Chapter I, it was the "design of darkness to appall" ("Design" 13); they were not favored by the moonlight but, like the woman in "The Fear," had to rely on artificial light which

. . . lengthened to the ground,
. . . struck . . . clattered, and went out. (102-103)

It has been mentioned in the introduction that those characters in the Frost poems who have "barricaded" their feelings and emotions within themselves are "mov[ing] in a darkness . . . Not of woods only and the shade of trees" ("Hending Wall" 41-42). To the fearful women who find

loneliness in love, nature itself is threatening; they are afraid to return to their farm homes after dark, even in the company of their husbands; the darkness around them hides vengeful figures which are figments of their imaginations; objects of nature take on threatening forms and worry them in the night.

Mary is not afraid to leave her home or return to it alone; she is not afraid to remain outside while her husband goes into the house: she feels a kinship with nature just as she feels a kinship with Warren. She is able to communicate with nature just as she is able to communicate with Warren. The poet blesses her with the benediction of the moonlight just as he does the couple in "In the Home Stretch," and that he withholds this from the women who have lost their ability to communicate is telling.

In "The Death of the Hired Man," Frost pictures a couple at ease with each other and with their surroundings. They must work hard for their living; Warren cannot afford to offer his hired hands even a small wage. They are no better off, financially, than the young couple in "The Hill Wife," but their marriage has managed to survive their straitened economic circumstances and the amount of toil which goes into farming because they have never lost touch with nature or each other.

This same companionship is seen in "West-running Brook." The couple portrayed in this dialogue poem is "young or new" (13), and because they are they can trust themselves to "go by contraries" (9). In this poem, Frost clearly shows the relationship of man to nature. What begins as a sentimental discussion on the part of the woman resolves itself in a serious monologue by her husband.

When the woman finds that the brook they have discovered runs west

When all the other county brooks flow east
To reach the ocean. (7-8)

she decides that they are very like the brook in the sense that they are not afraid to "go by contraries" (9).

She takes the brook "off to lady-land" (37); a place where, her husband realizes

We men must see you to the confines of
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter, (39-40)

when she says

As you and I are married to each other,
We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.
Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave
To let us know it hears me. (16-21)

When her husband disagrees with her

That wave's been standing off this jut of shore
Ever since rivers. . . .
Were made in heaven. It wasn't waved to us. (32-34)

the wife compromises by answering

It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you
It was to me--in an annunciation. (35-36)

To the woman this "annunciation" has been simply an announcement from the brook that it understood her words; to the husband, however, the "annunciation," although he scoffs at it, saying that his wife is taking the brook off to "lady-land" (37) (a term close to that of "Lady Day," a colloquial expression used for the feast of the Annunciation, commemorating the day on which the angel Gabriel made the announcement of the Incarnation to the Virgin Mary) is a starting point for his own discussion of the brook as the incarnation of men's lives. The brook incorporates the principles of life found in human beings. Just as the Incarnation signifies the union of Divinity and humanity in Christ, the brook symbolizes

the union of humanity and the natural divinity of nature in man.

As the husband says,

It is from that [running counter to one's self]
in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature. (44-46)

He is, as Wordsworth wrote,

. . . in a season of calm weather
[And] though far inland we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
[He] can in a moment travel thither,
And see the children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. (IX.161-167)¹

Gazing at the brook, one

get[s] back to the beginning of beginnings,
The stream of everything that runs away.
Some say existence like a Pirouet
And Pirouette, forever in one place,
Stands still and dances, but it runs away,
It seriously, sadly, runs away
To fill the abyss' void with emptiness.
(*"West-running Brook"* 48-54)

Life stands not still; existence is not a circle renewing itself in a
cycle of birth, death, birth. It is the seriousness and sorrow of life
that existence "runs away" to fill nothingness with nothingness.

It flows beside us in this water brook
But it flows over us. It flows between us
To separate us for a panic moment.
It flows between us, over us, and with us. (55-58)

Existence surrounds humans: it is beside them, evident in their natural
environment; it flows over them, and they drown in it, as the wives in
Chapter I do; it flows between them, separating them and panicking them,
for when the matters of existence tear loved ones apart the loneliness

¹William Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality," in Types of World Literature, eds. Percy H. Houston and Robert M. Smith (New York, 1930), p. 581.

that leads to desperation sets in. Most important, though, existence flows with them, for it is "time, strength, tone, light, life, and love" (59).

There is existence even in

. . . substance lapsing unsubstantial;
The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
Save by some strange resistance in itself,
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
As if regret were in it and were sacred. (60-65)

The final deluge of death wastes itself on nothingness; in payment for nothingness, nothing is given but a "strange resistance," "a throwing back," just as the waters of the

. . . black stream, catching on a sunken rock,
Plung backward on itself in one white wave,
And the white water rode the black forever,
Not gaining but not losing, like a bird
White feathers from the struggle of whose breast
Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool
Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled
In a white scarf against the far shore alders. (22-31)

Throughout life, man is constantly catching on "sunken rocks" and being tossed backward. Existence

. . . has this throwing backward on itself
So that the fall of most of it is always
Raising a little, sending up a little. (66-68)

Just as spray is thrown back to add to the swell behind it, existence is carried forward by the impulse of a wave. Each part of existence is pushed down to push another part up.

Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
The brook runs down in sending up our life.
The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
And there is something sending up the sun. (69-72)

Beyond nature as man would know it "there is something sending up the sun" (72); moreover, all of nature is directly involved in this cosmic

theory.*

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us. (73-77)

Man is constantly going against the stream, seeking the source of his life; this backward motion which aids in sending up some other part of nature is his "tribute" (75)--the payment due the source for his own outward movement.

When the husband has finished his monologue, the wife credits him with having made the day noteworthy: "Today will be the day / You said so" (78-79). Her husband counters with

No, today will be the day
You said the brook was called West-running Brook. (80-81)

The compromise they reach is an important one: "Today will be the day of what we both said" (82). It is their easy compatibility with each other and with their natural environment which makes the husband's long speech possible. It is their ability to communicate, to discover importance of their surroundings for each other which makes it possible for them to share, as it was never possible for the Hill Wife whose "song [was] only to herself" ("The Hill Wife: Impulse" III.3) to share with

* This same theory is expressed in "In Hardwood Groves":

Before the leaves can mount again
To fill the trees with another shade,
They must go down past things coming up.
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.
However it is in some other world
I know that this is the way in ours. (II-III)

her husband. The husband sees a pattern in nature which reflects human life and the divine plan on which it operates. The wife's comment that "we'll both be married to the brook" (17) indicates the attitude which people must have if they are to be initiated into the mysteries of nature, if they are to exist comfortably in their natural environment. Just as nature has made an impression on the couple, they have been able to make an impression on nature. When the wife discovers the brook runs west, she says, "West-running Brook then call it. (West-running Brook men call it to this day)" (4-5).

In "Snow" Frost deals with two families, the Coles, who have been routed out of bed by a late caller, Brother Meserve, a preacher who has been fighting a snowstorm to reach his home, and Meserve's family which is mentioned in passing by Mrs. Cole ("I detest the thought of him / With his ten children under ten years old" [57-58]) and becomes the focal point of the poem by way of a telephone call near the close of the action.

Although Mrs. Cole dislikes Meserve, she tries to persuade him--to no avail--to spend the night with them and not battle the storm any longer. Her husband admires him for the very thing his wife says she dislikes the preacher for--setting out in the snowstorm. Meserve is not one to be persuaded by women; neither his wife nor Mrs. Cole is able to convince him that he should stay sheltered for the night and continue his journey when the snow lets up.

Mrs. Cole makes the statement that she "hate[s] his wretched little Racker Sect" (59), but she is able to understand his ability to hold a congregation for, as her husband says, "He ha[s] the gift of words . . ." (271-272). He is able to master the rack of storm clouds which have

closed in on the area as well, for after leaving the Cole household he manages to make his way through the blowing and drifting snow and reach his home.

Helen Cole is not the type of woman who is used to being ignored; her husband makes this point while he characterizes Meserve at the same time:

That sort of man talks straight on all his life
From the last thing he said himself, stone deaf
To anything anyone else may say.
I should have thought, though, you could make him hear you. (71-74)

She is quite positive that Meserve should remain where he is for the night: "He shan't go--there!" (90) she says to her husband, and when she denies that she likes Meserve somewhat for having the nerve to venture out into the storm, Fred Cole replies:

Oh, yes you do.
You like your fun as well as anyone;
Only you women have to put these airs on
To impress men. You've got us so ashamed
Of being men we can't look at a good fight
Between two boys and not feel bound to stop it. (112-117)

She is trying to stop a good fight when she urges Meserve not to attempt to reach his home that night.

If you were the kind of man
Paid heed to women, you'd take my advice
And for your family's sake stay where you are.
But what good is my saying it over and over?
You've done more than you had a right to think
You could do--now. You know the risk you take
In going on. (234-240)

Meserve answers this argument with a theological one.

Yet think of the small birds at roost and not
In nests. Shall I be counted less than they are? (246-247)

When Mrs. Cole presses the point, reminding Meserve that his wife would prefer to have him stay with them than try to reach home, he replies,

"Save us from being cornered by a woman" (256). What is it that makes him feel he must continue his trip?

Well, there's--the storm. That says I must go on.
That wants me as a war might if it came.
Ask any man. (260-262)

Meserve's answer illustrates one facet of nature which is presented in Frost's poetry; although nature is a hard master, it also brings out the best efforts in man by challenging him.

In this poem there is a great deal of good-natured bantering between husband and wife. Although Mrs. Cole seems quite positive in her speech, Fred Cole is not above slyly baiting her. There seems to be an easy companionship between this farm couple just as there was between the couple in "West-running Brook." The Coles are pictured as foils to the Meserves, and in the latter family there seems to be no give and take, just the will of Meserve which dominates family activity.

Helen Cole is pictured as one who has a healthy respect for nature when it is storming. She is not timid and afraid of it, however, and when Meserve observes that the snow outside the window

. . . looks as if
Some pallid thing had squashed its features flat
And its eyes shut with overangerness
To see what people found so interesting
In one another, and had gone to sleep
Of its own stupid lack of understanding,
Or broken its white neck of mushroom stuff
Short off, and died against the window-pane, (177-184)

she warns him

Brother Meserve, take care, you'll scare yourself
More than you will us with such nightmare talk. (185-186)

In "The Death of the Hired Man," Mary was able to persuade her husband to see her point of view; in "Snow" Helen Cole is not successful in her attempts to dissuade Meserve from continuing his trip, but her

failure to do so is not important to the picture Frost presents of the Coles as a family unit. Frost's characters are not seen in relation to human society, actually, but in relation to each other and their natural environment. Even in "The Housekeeper," where the old woman narrates the story of what has taken place between Estelle and Jon Hall to a neighbor, the reader is not so much concerned with the woman's telling of the story or the neighbor's reaction as with the plight of the couple involved. In "Snow," although the reader is interested in the outcome of Meserve's trip through the storm, he is more concerned with the familial situations portrayed.

In "Maple" the reader is introduced to a young girl who is questioning her father about her name.

Her teacher's certainty it must be Mabel
 Made Maple first take notice of her name.
 She asked her father and he told her 'Maple--
 Maple is right.' (1-4)

He tells his daughter she was named by her mother, whom she had just seen

. . . in passing in the room upstairs,
 One coming this way into life, and one
 Going the other out of life . . . (13-15)

Throughout her life, Maple's name was both a mystery and a guide to her. At times she would forget to puzzle over its possible meanings, but

It came back vaguely at the glass one day,
 As she stood saying her name over aloud,
 Striking it gently across her lowered eyes
 To make it go well with the way she looked.
 What was it about her name? Its strangeness lay
 In having too many meanings

 Her problem was to find out what it asked
 In dress or manner of the girl who bore it. (42-55)

Her attempts to discover the meaning of her name led her on one occasion to her mother's Bible, where she found a maple leaf used as a

bookmark. Her diligent reading of the two pages between which it was pressed made but one impression on her mind,

. . . . Wave offering,*
 Something about wave offering, it said. (109-110)

The pages which she read did not offer any guide to her, and the mystery of her name remained.

So she looked for herself, as everyone
 Looks for himself, more or less outwardly.
 And her self-seeking, fitful though it was,
 May still have been what led her on to read,
 And think a little, and get some city schooling. (72-76)

Her education made it possible for her to obtain a position in an office in New York City, and it was in her work that she met her husband when he saw something in her that had escaped the other people she met. While she was "taking dictation on a paper pad" (81)

.
 Someone was saying in such natural tones
 She almost wrote the words down on her knee,
 "Do you know you remind me of a tree--
 A maple tree?"

 They both were stirred that he should have divined
 Without the name her personal mystery.
 It made it seem as if there must be something
 She must have missed herself. So they were married
 And took the fancy home with them to live by. (87-99)

For quite a while after their marriage they kept up the search for the meaning behind Maple's name. "They went on a pilgrimage once to her father's" (100), but the question was left unanswered; they "gave up the search forever" (138) although

They clung to what one had seen in the other
 By inspiration. It proved there was something. (139-140)

* Maple could have read any of four sections of the Bible concerned with wave offerings: Ex 29^{26F}, Ex 35²², Lv 7³⁴ 10^{14F}, Nu 8¹¹.

Although they had, in actuality, stopped looking for the "something" that was there, they were still drawn to the maple trees they saw, and this obsession ruled their lives: they avoided the sugaring season when the maple trees stood being drained of their sap.

When they made her related to the maples
It was the tree the autumn fire ran through
And swept of leathern leaves, but left the bark
Unscorched, unblackened, even, by any smoke. (144-147)

Their conception of what the name might symbolize was an unassailable beauty and strength.

Their vacations were always taken in autumn, and on one of them

. . . they came upon a maple in a glade,
Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,
And every leaf of foliage she'd worn
Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.
But its age kept them from considering this one.
Twenty-five years ago at Maple's naming
It hardly could have been a two-leaved seedling
The next cow might have licked up out at pasture.
Could it have been another maple like it?
They hovered for a moment near discovery,
Figurative enough to see the symbol,
But lacking faith in anything to mean
The same at different times to different people.
Perhaps a filial diffidence partly kept them
From thinking it could be a thing so bridal.
And anyway it came too late for Maple.
She used her hands to cover up her eyes.
'We would not see the secret if we could now;
We are not looking for it anymore.' (149-167)

The "key" to the secret can be found, perhaps, in both the "thing so bridal," the key fruit or double samara of the maple tree, the two-seeded winged fruit from which the maple tree springs, and the reference to the "wave offering" (109) which Maple remembered reading in the Bible. The enduring fruit of her parents' love is Maple, who was (her father told her)

. . . named after a maple tree.
Your mother named you. You and she just saw

Each other in passing in the room upstairs,
One coming this way into life, and one
Going the other out of life--you know?

.
She'd been having a long look at you.
She put her finger in your cheek so hard
It must have made your dimple there, and said,
"Maple." I said it too: "Yes, for her name."
She nodded. So we're sure there's no mistake.
I don't know what she wanted it to mean,
But it seems like some word she left to bid you
Be a good girl--be like a maple tree. (11-24)

According to the Dictionary of the Bible, the Hebrew word meaning "wave offering" "denotes a movement to and fro, swinging, 'waving,' the priest lifting his share of the victim and moving it to and fro in the direction of the altar, thus symbolizing the presentation of the part to Jahweh, and Jahweh's return of it to the priest."² The "coming and going" referred to by the father in the quotation from "Maple" seems related to the "to and fro" movement mentioned in the information from the Dictionary of the Bible. In the three books of the Bible which mention "wave offerings," the sacrifice is always made in connection with the anointing or consecrating of the chosen people. This anointing is accompanied by the laying on of the hands which signs the anointed one. In Maple's father's statement, we see an enactment of this "anointing" when Maple's mother puts "her finger in 'the child's' cheek so hard" (16) that it "must have made 'Maple's' dimple there" (19). The naming of the child "seems like some word 'the mother' left 'her daughter' to bid 'her' / Be a good girl" (23-24). Her name was one to live by and live up to.

"Thus," says the poet,

. . . had a name with meaning, given in death,
Made a girl's marriage, and ruled in her life.

²A. R. S. Kennedy, "Sacrifice and Offering," Dictionary of the Bible, eds. James Hastings, et al. (New York, 1930), p. 811.

No matter that the meaning was not clear.
 A name with meaning could bring up a child,
 Taking the child out of the parent's hands.
 Better a meaningless name, I should say,
 As leaving more to nature and happy chance.
 Name children some names and see what you do. (168-175)

In "Maple" we find actually two families (as we did in "Snow") and while the narrative revolves around Maple, the entire action is begun by her mother when the child is named. The conflict here seems to be one between Wordsworthian nature and Frost's nature. It was stated in the first chapter that in Wordsworth nature builds and fashions man's soul, personality and emotions. The girl in "Maple" is, to some degree, "brought up" by the name her mother gave her, the name which bid her "be like a maple tree." The extent of this fashioning of her personality is seen when her future husband "divines" the mystery in her and tells her that she reminds him "of a maple tree." Yet at the same time, we see the young couple trying to impose their own meanings on nature, and failing, not because they are unable to communicate with each other or the natural environment in which they live, but through a human failing, that of "lacking faith in anything to mean / The same at different times to different people" (160-161). The name which the mother gave to her daughter, a name taken from the nature which the mother obviously loved, was a mystery to Maple all of her life, but it was also a bond between her and her husband--"a fancy" they took home to live by. For this reason, although the name and the nature which gave it frustrated both the young woman and her husband, Maple seems to belong in the category of the happy wives rather than with the unhappy wives who are barricaded from the rest of their world by their fears and loneliness.

In most of Frost's poems concerned with family crises, the couples

involved are young. In "In the Home Stretch," we find a couple "not young now" (61) moving into a farmhouse after years spent in the city. The woman has come to the country home mainly because her husband has "always wanted" (137) to retire away from the city on their own bit of farm land. Conceivably she did not relish the thought of living on a farm where the life is often hard and less comfortable than city living, but her cheerful attitude is that they have been "dumped down in paradise . . . and happy" (176). They have managed to achieve the paradise that the runaway lovers of "The Discovery of the Madieras" were seeking through a mutual satisfaction with each other and a willingness to give for and to one another.

Although the country is new to them, it is a friendly "newness," not a terrifying phenomenon as it was for the hill wife or the woman in "The Fear." The woods are

waiting to steal a step on [them] whenever
[they] drop [their] eyes or turn to other things,
as in the game "Ten-step" the children play, (125-127)

but they are not sinister; they are simply playing games.

Is it too late
To drag you out for just a good-night call
On the old peach trees on the knoll to grope
By starlight in the grass for a last peach
The neighbors may not have taken as their right
.....
Before we set ourselves to right the house,
The first thing in the morning, out we go
To go the round on apple, cherry, peach,
Pine, alder, pasture, mowing, well, and brook.
All of a farm it is, (209-220)

There is a harmonious relationship with nature, and their marital relationship is harmonious as well. They live in easy comradeship with each other and their surroundings. The sight of a new moon in the sky seems to be a friendly gesture to the woman, as much a portent of good luck as

the proper fitting of the stovepipe is to the young men who are helping her move into her new home.

A wire she is of silver, as new as we
To everything. Her light won't last us long.
It's something though to know we're going to have her
Night after night and stronger every night
To see us through our first two weeks. (77-81)

Here, as in "The Death of the Hired Man," the moonlight is a benediction. Inside the house, the fire is "company" (157). This couple does not move in shadows as the young couple in "Home Burial" did; and although the woman admits to a certain "house fear" such as that expressed by the hill wife and the woman in "The Fear,"* ". . . the strangeness soon wears off" (145), and the darkness is not haunted by figments of her imagination.

The husband is content in his new surroundings, but concerned that his wife may be sacrificing her own desires to his:

I'd like to know
If it is what you wanted, then how much
You wanted it for me. (180-182)

He wonders which one of them said "the word to come" (186) first.

The wife shows her understanding of her husband and the human situation when she replies,

'You're searching, Joe,
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
Ends and beginnings--there are no such things.
There are only middles.'

'What is this?'

'This life?
Our sitting here by lantern-light together
Amid the wreckage of a former home?

* ". . . The House / Seems haunted or exposed. I always / Take a personal interest in the locking up / At bedtime."

The stove is not, and you are not to me,
Nor I to you.'

'Perhaps you never were?'

'It would take me forever to recite
All that's not new in where we find ourselves.' (188-201)

The couple can, as can the young husband and wife of "West-running Brook," trust themselves to go by contraries because they are not new to one another, and perhaps they never were. Their harmonious relationship has made possible the move from the lighted city streets to "country darkness" (56) where

It's not so bad . . . settled down,
When people are getting on in life. (102-103)

Just as Mrs. Cole in "Snow" manages, to some extent, her husband by gentle persuasion, and tries to convince Meserve not to venture out into the storm, the wife in "In the Home Stretch" manages her husband. When he asks her to take a walk around the farm, she answers him by hustling him off to bed; they are, after all, no longer young, and the strain of moving has left Joe "drunk-nonsensical tired out" (171).

"When there was no more lantern in the kitchen" (223), the idea expressed by the woman that "there are no such things" (190) as ends and beginnings, and the idea that there is nothing new in this old farmhouse and the couple who has come to live there is reemphasized:

The fire got out through crannies in the stove
And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,
As much at home as if they'd always danced there. (224-226)

Several comparisons between the woman in "In the Home Stretch" and the other farm wives mentioned in this chapter have already been made; and several contrasts between her and the women mentioned in Chapter I have been brought out also. In this poem, we find the mellowing of the

young wives and husbands of "The Death of the Hired Man," "Snow," "Maple," and "West-running Brook." In the latter poem, the young wife romantically proposes marriage to the brook; in "In the Home Stretch," the wife, like Mary in "The Death of the Hired Man," looks upon the moon as a friend. She uses the same persuasion on her husband to get him off to bed as Mary did to bring Warren around from his view of Silas, and that Mrs. Cole exercised on Fred and tried to exercise on Meserve. While she is not looking for a "meaning" in nature as Maple did, she finds nature meaningful, and between the "weeds, the field, / The wood" (51-52) she sees from her kitchen window, she sees "the years" (50)--those that have been and those that are yet to come.

At the same time, she is the antithesis of the women in "Home Burial," "The Fear," "The Discovery of the Madieras," "A Servant to Servants," "The Hill Wife," and "The Housekeeper." Although she shows some symptoms of house fear, she is not plagued by guilt or loneliness, and "the strangeness soon wears off" (145). The woods hide vengeful figures from both the woman in "The Fear" and the hill wife, but to the older woman in "In the Home Stretch" they are simply playing games. She takes pleasure in nature, which the servant to servants cannot do; she sees more out her window than her own emotions dictate; she is able to communicate with her husband as none of the women mentioned in this group of poems are able to do.

The theme which runs through all of the poems mentioned in this chapter is one of sharing, or companionship, with each other and with nature. Love is strengthened by nature. In "Two Look at Two," Frost makes clear his thesis that love shared with nature, "married" ("West-running Brook" 16) to it, is not lessened but increased. There are

boundaries between the natural world and the human world, but contemplation of what lies on the other side of the wall often leads to understanding.

Love and forgetting might have carried them
 A little further up the mountainside
 With night so near, but not much further up.
 They must have halted soon in any case.
 With thoughts of the path back, how rough it was
 With rock and washout, and unsafe in darkness;
 When they were halted by a tumbled wall
 With barbed-wire binding. They stood facing this,
 Spending what onward impulse they still had
 In one last look the way they must not go . . .
 ("Two Look at Two" 1-10)

While the couple stands looking "the way they must not go," a doe appears on the other side of the wall, watching them as intently as they watch her. "She saw them in their field, they her in hers" (17). The doe was not afraid of them; she seemed to sense that because there were two she need have no fear. When she walked, "unscared" (24), along the wall in front of them, they felt that their evening was complete: that nature had no more to give to them. Before they turned away, however, a buck appeared in the doe's place, and eyed them just as quizzically as she had. He was not afraid of them either, and "he too passed unscared along the wall" (37).

Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
 "This must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
 A great wave from it going over them,
 As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
 Had made them certain earth returned their love. (38-42)

The natural order has been preserved; man has not ventured beyond the boundaries; he has not even stretched "a proffering hand--and a spell-breaking" (36). He has been content with what nature has given, seeing it as an indication earth returns his love. This is the ideal relationship; man in harmony with his natural environment. This is

the relationship which must exist for the farm couples in Frost's poetry if their marital relationships are to be harmonious and rewarding.

The solitude which surrounds the unhappy wives discussed in Chapter I springs from a lack of communication with both their husbands and their surroundings. The close harmony in which the wives discussed in this chapter live with their husbands reflects the harmony with which both dwell in Frost's world of natural objects.

CHAPTER III

"Two Witches"

Frost's two witches, the witch of Coos and the pauper witch of Grafton, are extreme cases of women overcome with guilt. The difference between the two of them lies in the fact that the witch of Coos has been plagued with guilt for most of her adult life while the witch of Grafton knew a happiness and companionship in her married life akin to that of the women discussed in Chapter II.

In "The Witch of Coos," the action takes place "at a farm / Behind the mountain" (1-2) where the narrator has stopped for the night. The mother and son who live alone in the house were "old-believers" (3). The mother is, by her own description, a witch, a status of which her son is very proud.

Summoning spirits isn't Button, button,
Who's got the button; I would have them know,
("Two Witches: The Witch of Coos" 7-8)

the mother says; and the son, anxious to display his mother's power, recalls that

Mother can make a common table rear
And kick with two legs like an army mule. (9-10)

The mother brushes this aside as a rather unsubstantial test of her real powers and recounts "what Ralle the Sioux Control once told" (13) her:

He said the dead had souls, but when I asked him
How could that be--I thought the dead were souls,
He broke my trance. Don't that make you suspicious
That there's something the dead are keeping back?
Yes, there's something the dead are keeping back. (14-18)

The son, whose conversation reveals him as a dull-witted individual,

is excited by the presence of a stranger to listen to his mother's tales, and urges her to tell a more personal--and scari--fying--one.

You wouldn't want to tell him what we have
Up attic, mother? (19-20)

"What [they] have up attic" is "Bones--a skeleton" (21) which is barricaded now behind the nailed-shut attic door with the headboard of the mother's bed pushed tight against it. The woman begins her tale of how the bones came to be where they are by ironically stating that "the only fault [her] husband found with [her]" (37) was that she would fall asleep in her chair in the evening. On one occasion, when her husband had left her dreaming in her chair, she thought she heard him in the cellar and upstairs at the same time. Then she realized that the noise in the cellar was being made by the bones. Because of her curiosity to "see how the bones] were mounted for this walk" (68), she opened the cellar door to the skeleton.

A moment he stood balancing with emotion,
And all but lost himself. (A tongue of fire
Flashed out and licked along his upper teeth.
Smoke rolled inside the sockets of his eyes.)
Then he came at me with one hand outstretched,
The way he did in life once; but this time
I struck the hand off brittle on the floor
.....
The finger-pieces slid in all directions.
(Where did I see one of those pieces lately?
Hand me my button-box--it must be there.) (72-82)

The skeleton made its way up the stairs to the bedroom where her husband was, and then began to climb the attic steps; as soon as it was safely in the attic, the woman's husband nailed the door shut, and nailed shut it has remained. The son, once the story is told, is ready to continue in a life of many years and tell the visiting stranger that "We never could find out whose bones they were" (138). The telling of

the story has proved a self-revelation to the old woman, however, and she confesses that

They were a man's his father killed for me.
I mean a man he killed instead of me. (140-141)

The story her son had been about to tell was one they had

. . . kept all these years between ourselves
So as to have it ready for outsiders.
But tonight I don't care enough to lie--
I don't remember why I ever cared.
Toffile, if he were here, I don't believe
Could tell you why he ever cared himself (147-156)

The "skeleton" obviously was a figment of the woman's imagination, brought about by her feelings of guilt over committing adultery and assisting in the murder of her lover. Toffile "didn't seem to hear [the bones]" (118) when they climbed the steps; nor did he see the skeleton as the woman claimed she did. The finger-bones for which she searches through her button box are never found. And for good reason. The "attic" (114) in which the guilty phantom is locked up is the woman's own mind. Her guilt awakens her in the night "With sounds like the dry rattling of a shutter" (130). She "promised Toffile to be cruel to [the bones] / For helping them be cruel once to him" (134-135), but the cruelty has been visited on herself for she is the one who has been tortured by the skeleton--an extension of her suppressed guilt.

At the point portrayed in the poem, the woman is able to look objectively at the events of her life, and finally comes to the realization that she does not remember now why she ever cared enough to lie about the truth. Her guilt to this point obsessed her to the extent that her witchery grew out of it--her power to communicate with the dead who "are keeping something back" (18).

In "The Witch of Coos," we find the case of the woman in "The Fear"

magnified; she, too, saw figures of vengeance in the dark. We find as well the plight of all the women discussed in Chapter I--the lonely, fearful, guilt-ridden or grief-ridden women who are unable to find rapport with their husbands and often seek it with other men or, as in the case of Amy in "Home Burial," by turning within themselves to the exclusion of their spouses.

The pauper witch of Grafton narrates her story to the reader just as the witch of Coos does, but her tale simply tells the reader about her past and does not represent any turning point in her life, although she does admit that

All is, if I'd a-known when I was young
And full of it, that this would be the end,
It doesn't seem as if I'd had the courage
To make so free and kick up in folk's faces.
I might have, but it doesn't seem as if.

("The Two Witches: Pauper Witch of Grafton" 104-108)

The witch of Grafton's married life with Arthur Amy was a happy one, characterized by the light-hearted bantering back and forth found also in "In the Home Stretch" and "West-running Brook." Her husband would tease her about being a witch;

He got to saying things. . . .
Like, 'No, she ain't come back from kiting yet.
Last night was one of her nights out. She's kiting.
She thinks when the wind makes a night of it
She might as well herself,' But he liked best
To let on he was plagued to death with [his wife]:
If anyone had seen [her] coming home
Over the ridgepole, 'stride of a broomstick,
As often as he had in the tail of the night,
He guessed they'd know what he had to put up with. (78-88)

She "showed Arthur Amy signs enough . . ." (89)

. . . woman signs to man,
Only bewitched so I would last him longer. (95-95)

It is easy to believe her when she says "he liked everything I made him

do" (100), even to gathering her

. . . wet snow berries
On slippery rocks beside a waterfall
. . . in the dark. (97-99)

Their relationship was an easy one. The love between the witch of Grafton and her Arthur Amy was a true and lasting one. Her husband is dead at the time of her narration, and she hopes

. . . if he is where he sees me now
He's so far off he can't see what I've come to.
You can come down from everything to nothing. (101-103)

It is this lament, which is also found in "Provide, Provide"

No memory of having starved
Atones for later disregard,
Or keeps the end from being hard. (VI)

that brings the witch to her final conclusion that, had she known what the end would be, she might not have "made so free" (107) when she was younger.

The two witches, while very similar in some respects, differ a great deal in others. The "witching powers" of both of them have a sexual basis; they are both widows and have come to a lonely old age, although the witch of Coos has her son for company. She also has at least her home left to her, while the pauper witch is constantly shuttled between two towns, neither of which wants the responsibility of expense of caring for her. But while the witch of Coos has something left to her in the sense of comfort and company, she has only guilty memories of her past, and even these have ceased to mean much to her at the point portrayed in the poem. The witch of Grafton, on the other hand, although she is left penniless, has at least the happy memories of her marriage to comfort her. She has not been troubled by guilt; she has not tried to suppress her thoughts of the past as the witch of Coos did. Although both old

women are bereft of everything they once had in the sense of power, the one is still very much herself in her memories of her husband's bantering while the other is simply a woman who is past caring. She no longer has the heart, as the witch of Grafton does, to say

. . . the temptation to do right
 When I can hurt someone by doing it
 Has always been too much for me, it has. (33-35)

Thus we see that the attitudes and emotions of the farm women have their effect even after they are widows: that the guilt which many of them carry as young women is not a burden to be easily disposed of, and that lack of communication, a lack of companionship and trust with their husbands, indicates not only their relationship with their spouses but their relationships with others as well. The witch of Coos story begins as a fabricated version; having been false to her husband, herself, and her lover, she could hardly expect to be any other way with a stranger for an audience. The witch of Grafton, however, knows herself for what she is, and her tale is told openly and with the humor and easiness which characterized her married life.

CHAPTER IV

"The Silken Tent"

In his poetry, Frost portrays many types of married women: the unhappy wives who do not communicate with their spouses or the natural environment in which they live; the happy wives who do; and the witches who represent the widowed women and the life-time culmination of either guilt or companionship. Which of these is Frost's ideal wife or real woman? The answer lies in "The Silken Tent" in which the reader finds the woman who is in communication with her environment, who has a "sureness of soul" (7), and who "is loosely bound / By countless silken ties of love and thought" (9-10).

The sonnet, "The Silken Tent," should be repeated in its entirety:

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly tent
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

The woman described here obviously exists in a world of beneficent nature. There is a "sunny summer breeze" playing around her with "the capriciousness of summer air." She is "bound by countless silken ties of love and thought / To everything on earth the compass round." She is compared to a "silken tent," indicating that she is fine and strong

herself. She has an easy companionship with her husband, and it is

. . . only by one's going slightly taut
 . . . [that she] is of the slightest bondage made aware. (12-14)

The ties by which she is held are "silken" (10); her relationship with her husband is a strong one of "love and thought" (10).

When we compare the married women in Frost's poetry to the ideal expressed in this poem, we are able to see how and why so many of the marriages fail. The servant to servants, for example, does not exist in a world of natural objects as this woman does. She has no feeling toward nature; where once she would

. . . step outdoors and take the water dazle
 A sunny morning, or take the rising wind
 About [her] face and through [her] wrapper . . . (26-28)

she now finds no "capriciousness in the summer air" ("Silken Tent" 13). No "silken ties" (10) bind her to her husband or to her environment.

The same is true of the hill wife, whose "song [is] only to herself" ("The Hill Wife: The Impulse" III.3), and the woman in "The Fear" who has no "sureness of soul" ("Silken Tent" 7), and whose natural world has been warped by her guilty imagination into a "design of darkness to appall" ("Design" II.5). Amy, in "Home Burial," rejects the "supporting central cedar pole" ("Silken Tent" 5), and looks upon her husband not as a means of support and comfort but as a heartless individual. She is not bound "to everything on earth the compass round" (11), but only to her own overwhelming and unnatural grief.

The quality which is lacking in all the unhappy, lonely wives is that of "sureness of soul" (7), and while some have forfeited this themselves (the woman in "The Fear," for example, who is not sure she has made the right decision in leaving her husband), others have lost it

through a complete capitulation to their emotions (Amy in "Home Burial") or through a combination of lack of communication and resignation (the servant to servants).

The women discussed in Chapter II, however, do exist in the natural world around them; the ties which bind them to their spouses and their environment are not shackles of fear or guilt, but "silken ties" (10) of understanding and love. They are able to go by contraries with their spouses, to "sway at ease" (4) within the confines of the

. . . supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul. . . . (5-7)

They are, in the sense of exercising gentle persuasion, protective tents; but at the same time they are women who are truly feminine--silken tents--because their lives revolve around their husbands. Here we see the easy companionship, the bantering tone of the Amys' conversations, the love of earth and natural surroundings which is rewarded in "Two Look at Two." These are the women who can recite and understand the plea found in "A Prayer in Spring":

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white,
Like nothing else by day, like ghosts by night;
And make us happy in the happy bees,
The swarms dilating round the perfect trees.

And make us happy in the darting bird
That suddenly above the bees is heard,
The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,
And off a blossom in mid air stands still.

For this is love and nothing else is love,
The which it is reserved for God above
To sanctify to what far ends He will,
But which it only needs that we fulfill.

The women discussed in Chapter II realize love "only needs that we fulfill" (IV.4) it. They take pleasure in "the flowers today" (I.1) and "in the orchard white" (II.1). At evening, when the sky is dark, the woods are "like ghosts" (II.1), but not vengeful phantoms created by guilt, fear, or loneliness. They are "happy in the darting bird" (III.1), unlike the hill wife who is "too sad . . ." ("The Hill Wife; Loneliness" III.1) "for whatever it is they sing" (II.2). Because the bird's song is filled with joy in nature and "with each other and themselves" (III.3) it is as incomprehensible to the hill wife as all nature is to the servant to servants. Perhaps the most important word in "A Prayer in Spring" is "us" (I.1) rather than "me." The happy wife wants all this not only for herself but for her husband as well. This act of sharing distinguishes the happy wife from the unhappy wife who shares nothing but her solitude with her husband.

Thus we have seen that the married women in Frost's poetry exist either in the natural world around them, or in a dark world of their own making. His use of the sunlight and moonlight to illuminate the scenes describing the happy couples indicates that nature has smiled on those who are able to communicate with each other as a result of never losing touch with the natural objects around them. The couples who are able to communicate and share do not hold a romantic view of nature; they are as aware of the "uncertain harvest" (I.3) as those couples who have not made a success of their marriages. They realize, however, while the others do not, that the pleasure and happiness available in nature is ". . . love, and nothing else is love . . ." (IV.1).

CHAPTER V

"Pan with Us"

The theme of communication with nature as an aid to communication with mankind as seen in the preceding chapters is not an isolated one in Frost's poetry. It is a major message of his work and can be found, combined with his larger view of nature, in many of his poems. In "West-running Brook," the young husband tells his wife that

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us. (75-77)

Frost sees mankind turning to nature to complete his life, because he sees nature as the source of it. In the poems discussed in this paper, it has been seen that nature breaks down barriers that exist between human beings, that nature brightens darkness and allows free communication between those who understand and communicate with it.

This has been the focal point of the poems dealing with married women; it is also the philosophy of life found in the major part of Frost's poetry. There is a hungering in mankind after beauty, knowledge, and truth. Nature is the source of all these qualities, and mankind is continually striving to cross the gulf which separates him from full and total union with nature--from a full and total understanding of beauty, knowledge, and truth.

Nature, in a sense, leads man on; in "The Star-Splitter," Brad

McLaughlin is teased by a

. . . life-long curiosity
About our place among the infinities

into burning down his house to have enough insurance money to purchase a telescope with which to study the stars. This "life-long curiosity" about nature is common to all men. In nature, they see their lives portrayed: the source in the sea, the enactment of the birth-death process in the seasons of the year. The sorrow of man's life is reflected in his natural environment; the inner longings of his heart and his view of the world are seen in his surroundings, but cannot completely satisfy him or console him. In "Reluctance," Frost expresses his idea that nature represents man's life and holds the answers to all his questions.

Out through the fields and the woods
And over the walls I have wended;
I have climbed the hills of view
And looked at the world, and descended;
I have come by the highway home,
And lo, it is ended.

The leaves are all dead on the ground,
Save those that the oak is keeping
To ravel them one by one
And let them go scraping and creeping
Out over the crusted snow
When others are sleeping.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,
No longer blown hither and thither;
The last lone aster is gone;
The flowers of the witch-hazel wither;
The heart is still aching to seek,
But the feet question 'Whither?'

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?

Man's life is slowly revealed from existence; he is like a leaf, "blown

hither and thither." Although man knows the cycle of life and realizes that seasons end and death comes, he is unable to gracefully accept "the end of a love or a season."

If man is reluctant to give up his search after truth, Nature is just as reluctant to yield the answers. It has been pointed out that a communication with nature allows for free intercourse between humans, but it has also been noted that nature and man are separated by a wide gulf and that perfect union is impossible. Frost's best acknowledgment of this fact is found, perhaps, in "The Demiurge's Laugh."

It was far in the sameness of the wood;
I was running with joy on the Demon's trail,
Though I knew what I hunted was no true god.
It was just as the light was beginning to fail
That I suddenly heard--all I needed to hear;
It has lasted me many and many a year.

The sound was behind me instead of before,
A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
As of one who utterly couldn't care.
The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh,
Brushing the dirt from his eyes as he went;
And well I knew what the demon meant.

I shall not forget how his laugh rang out.
I felt as a fool to have been so caught,
And checked my steps to make pretense
It was something among the leaves I sought
(Though doubtful whether he stayed to see).
Thereafter I sat me against a tree.

It is a mistake to think of nature in the Wordsworthian sense; this is no molder of men's souls or shaper of men's personalities. The demiurge "utterly couldn't care" about the "fool" who is caught trying to divine his mysteries. Man, when he realizes this, must "make pretense / It was something among the leaves" he was seeking in order to save face.

All of man's advances, supposedly drawing him closer to the truth, merely stand in the way of whatever communication with nature is

possible. When Brad McLaughlin buys his telescope to

. . . satisfy [his] life-long curiosity
About our place in the infinities
(*"The Star-Splitter"* 18-19)

he does not actually come any closer to an understanding of that place than any of the men before him who have tried to divine some knowledge from the stars. With the poet, he gazes at the sky through a long night, and after they have

. . . looked and looked . . . where are we?
Do we know any better where we are,
And how it stands between the night tonight
And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
How different from the way it ever looked? (95-99)

The Edenic paradise--sought by the lovers in *"The Discovery of the Madeiras"*--was a blissful spot because man existed in nature; now he exists with nature, ever seeking the knowledge which was lost by the Fall. Pan once

. . . tossed his pipes, too hard to teach
A new-world song, far out of reach,
For a sylvan sign that the blue jay's screech
And the whisper of hawks beside the sun
Were music enough for him, for one.

Times were changed from what they were:
Such pipes kept less of power to stir
The fruited bough of the juniper
And the fragile bluets clustered there
Than the merest aimless breath of air.

They were pipes of pagan mirth,
And the world had found new terms of worth.
He laid him down on the sun-burned earth
And raveled a flower and looked away--
Play? Play?--What should he play? (IV-VI)

Pan's song is incomprehensible to mankind, just as the flowing river's significance was incomprehensible to the servant to servants. She did not exist comfortably in her natural environment, and nature had nothing to say to her, just as she, in turn, had nothing to say to those

around her. She could not "express her feelings" ("A Servant to Servants" 7); approaching madness made it impossible for her to feel anything about anything, although there is

. . . a voice-like left inside
That seems to tell [her] how [she] ought to feel,
And would feel if [she] wasn't all gone wrong. (13-15)

Thus man has a "voice-like left inside" which indicates to him that nature holds the secret of his destiny if he could but read it there. But the constant changing of the world, its constant striving to control and understand nature, takes man farther away from Pan's song and a true union with nature. The haunting memory of a union with knowledge, beauty, and truth makes man seek it again in his natural surroundings, but the search is a vain one. In "The Trial by Existence," Frost tells of "the gathering of the souls for birth" (III.2).

And none are taken but who will,
Having first heard the life read out
That opens earthward, good and ill,
Beyond the shadow of a doubt; (V.1-4)

.

But always God speaks at the end:

.

'But the pure fate to which you go
Admits no memory of choice . . . ' (VII.1-6)

And so the choice must be again,
But the last choice is still the same;
And the awe passes wonder then,
And a hush falls for all acclaim.
And God has taken a flower of gold
And broken it, and used therefrom
The mystic link to bind and hold
Spirit to matter till death come. (VIII)

Man's link to God, the fountainhead of all those qualities which he seeks on earth, is a mystic one of "a flower of gold . . . broken." It is no wonder, then, that it is through nature man seeks a re-union with God;

it is no wonder, either, that man's ambitions, taking him away from union with nature, deter him from finding the goals that he seeks--or professes to seek.

Nature has been seen in this paper as an aid to man's communications with his fellows. The success or failure of the marriages discussed depends largely upon the married women's ability to communicate with their natural surroundings. Although nature has much more to offer, man is unable to reach it, and must be content not with knowing "any better where we are" ("The Star-Splitter" 96), but in saying "some of the best things we ever said" (86) under its influence.

SOURCES CONSULTED

SOURCES CONSULTED

- Frost, Lillian. Personal Interview. Billings, Montana. November, 1962.
- Frost, Robert. The Complete Poems. New York, 1930.
- _____. In the Clearing. New York, 1962.
- Hastings, James, et al., eds. Dictionary of the Bible. New York, 1930.
- Houston, Percy H., and Robert M. Smith. eds. Types of World Literature.
New York, 1930.